**The Second Great Awakening**

At the turn of the nineteenth century, America was still a devotedly church-going nation. Most Americans felt a traditional religious faith to be the foundation of moral character, and many worried that over time the religious imperative would wane into token gestures and empty social structures. These concerns increased with news of the cruelties and excesses of the French Revolution done in the name of reason.

In 1795, Timothy Dwight became president of Yale College, described as a “hotbed of infidelity.” Determined to counter the secular trend in American thinking, Dwight sponsored a series of religious revivals that fired the collective soul of the Yale student body and spread across New England, igniting a religious movement called the Second Great Awakening. The sermons preached from the pulpits of this great revival did not attempt like the old-time Puritans to pressure a captive congregation with dire predictions of a vengeful God’s omniscient power and arbitrary judgments. Rather, they spoke of a benevolent Father whose most passionate desire was the salvation of every one of His children down to the most lost sinner.

At a religious assembly, a person could be saved by faith alone during a conversion experience. Unusual behaviors such as “speaking in tongues” or convulsive fits of religious ecstasy sometimes accompanied these experiences. The only absolute requisite to salvation, however, was an acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice as atonement for one’s sins. All people were free to accept this gift or not. But the fires of everlasting hell, described in lush and vivid imagery, awaited those who turned their backs.

The Second Great Awakening soon spread to the frontier. Beginning in the South and moving northward along the frontier to the Old Northwest, a new institution, the camp meeting, ignited a spiritual fervor that converted thousands and altered the religious landscape of America forever. Many traditional churches were swept away in this new awakening. Others reformed to counter the firestorm of the evangelical preacher.

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Besides the spiritual message, revival meetings offered entertainment in an age when other diversions for the average person were either of the homegrown variety or of a quiet, literary nature. A free-wheeling, fire-and-brimstone revival provided an acceptable emotional and social outlet for people of the frontier who were mostly engaged in farming and other rural, labor-intensive agricultural pursuits. Of particular importance, women could attend and participate in religious revivals at a time when many social outlets available to men, such as taverns and fraternal organizations, were neither considered appropriate nor allowed for women. This offered revival preachers a natural female constituency that contributed immeasurably to their success.

In the south, black slaves and freed men and women could also attend segregated, companion revivals. The emotional, spiritual, and social opportunity of such a gathering can scarcely be appreciated in the modern age for its intensity. These meetings gave rise to a rich and remarkable tradition of black preachers who provided not merely social and spiritual but political cohesion to much-beleaguered black communities in the difficult times to come.

Western New York hosted so many revival meetings patronized by the hellfire-and-brimstone variety of preacher that it came to be known as the “burned-over district.” With the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, commerce and industry boomed, particularly around Utica in Oneida County. This attracted great numbers of people seeking a fresh start in life. Such seekers were prime subjects for conversion by revivalists because of the social nature of a revival. At a camp meeting, a person joined hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others on an essentially egalitarian basis. Though many were drawn to the meetings for the social aspect, they were easily caught up in the event and followed through with conversion.

The women of Utica were particularly concerned with the spiritual health of their community, and since women did not generally work outside the home they had the time to organize community activities. The Oneida County Female Missionary Society raised sufficient money to support the revival movement in the area for a number of years. The role of women in the Second Great Awakening can scarcely be over-emphasized. Women were converted in equal numbers with men, but once converted tended to be even more solid adherents to their church than their male counterparts. Viewed as the moral center of the family, a woman was responsible for her husband’s and children’s spiritual well being. Women took this responsibility seriously and sought to fulfill it through church participation and, later in the century, through organizing charitable and benevolent associations aimed at social reform.

Evangelists were aware that their power to make converts rested substantially in their influence with women. The new gospels emphasized the importance of the role of women in bringing their families to Christian life. They placed an equal value on the spiritual worth of men and women, in contrast to earlier religions that tended to minimize women’s importance in the spiritual as well as secular spheres. This gender egalitarianism in religious matters marked a break with the past and offered women the opportunity to acquire standing in the community without treading on the secular prerogatives of their husbands. Once this door was opened to them, women continued to play a crucial role in religious life and went on to become pioneers and crusaders in nineteenth century social reform.

Many prominent preachers frequented the pulpits of the burned-over-district. Among them, William Miller gained a following of around 100,000 with a Biblical interpretation of the Second Coming of Christ on October 22, 1844. Failure of the prophecy to materialize did not wholly quench the Millerite movement, which became known as Seventh Day Adventist.

Perhaps the greatest evangelist was the former lawyer Charles Grandison Finney, who conducted an intense, sustained revival in the burned-over-district from 1826 to 1831. Beginning in Utica, he made his way in stages to Rochester and New York City. Church membership grew by tens of thousands wherever he held revivals. A spellbinding orator, Finney preached a theology in pointed contrast to Puritan Calvinism. Salvation could be had by anyone through faith and good works, which he felt flowed from one another. People were the captains of their own fate, and since Judgment Day could come at any time, his hearers should take immediate action to ensure the redemption of themselves and their loved ones.

Finney was a master of showmanship and participatory psychology. His revival agenda included hymn singing and solicitation of personal testimonials from the congregation. He placed an “anxious bench” in the front of the assembly for those teetering on the brink of commitment to Christ. The moment of holy redemption for a bench-sitter became a dramatic event. Finney encouraged women to pray aloud and denounced alcohol and slavery from the pulpit. He felt that mass, public conversions were more effective than the old-style, solitary communion because they emphasized the fraternal nature of church membership. Finney later became president of Oberlin College in Ohio, the first U.S. college to admit women and blacks and a hotbed of abolitionism and evangelical zeal.

The crusading spirit of religious evangelism carried over into secular life and expressed itself in a number of reform movements. Temperance, suffrage, prison reform, and abolition all received an infusion of energy from evangelical vigor. In addition, the traveling preacher expanded the horizons of imagination beyond the local sphere and even beyond the borders of the nation. Supporting a mission in a foreign country or among Native Americans in the West became a binding cause for many churches. Reports from missionaries in such exotic places as Africa, India, or Hawaii were awaited with breathless expectation. As an enticement to listen to their religious message, missionaries often provided medical, technical, and educational benefits to the people in the locale of their mission. In these ways, the Second Great Awakening contributed to changing not just the nation, but the world.

Revivalism did not affect the wealthier, better-educated parts of society that gravitated to Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Unitarian churches as much as it did rural and frontier communities that tended to be Baptist or Methodist. The Baptist faith proved ideal for conditions on the frontier. Baptists believed in a literal reading of the Bible that required no authoritarian interpretation. They also subscribed to the concept of the possibility of any person obtaining salvation through his or her own free will. Above all, however, they believed that a church was its own highest authority and thus avoided the difficulties and delays of petitions to and approvals from a distant hierarchical organization.

A group of Baptists could form their own church on the spot and choose a preacher from among themselves. The Baptists were egalitarian in their creed, believing that all people were equal before God regardless of their economic, social, or educational standing. The simplest farmer in Kentucky was on par in native dignity with every other person in the Republic. These beliefs and the Baptists’ uncomplicated organization were highly appealing to small communities of self-sufficient, independent-minded people.

The Methodists, however, were most successful at reaping the benefits of religious revivalism of the early 1800s by establishing a system of itinerant preachers on horseback, or circuit riders. Francis Asbury began the practice when the frontier was scarcely west of the Appalachian Mountains. Hardy and fearless, Asbury rode the rugged backwoods trails and preached thousands of sermons to farmers, pioneers, and backwoodsmen and their families.

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Churches came to reflect deep divisions that paralleled sectional interests in the country far beyond issues of religious doctrine or socio-economic stratification. By 1845, both the Baptist and Methodist Churches split over slavery. Presbyterians suffered a similar schism in 1857. The Northern churches of these denominations believed in abolishing slavery while Southern congregations felt their economic well-being was bound to a slaveholding system. The conflict over human bondage thus broke first in the communities of religion, which served as heralds to the South’s secession from the Union and, ultimately, to the American Civil War.

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